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Unnatural Pumas and Domestic Foxes: Relations with Protected Predators and Conspiratorial Rumours in Southern Chile

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ABSTRACT

Human–wildlife conflicts involving protected predators are a major social and environmental problem worldwide. A critical aspect in such conflicts is the role of state institutions regarding predators' conservation, and how this is construed by affected local populations. These interpretations are frequently embodied in conspiratorial rumours, sharing some common traits related to wild and domestic categories, spatial ordering and power relations. In southern Chile, a one-year, multi-sited ethnographic study of human–animal relations in and adjacent to protected areas was undertaken, foregrounding conspiratorial rumours concerning protected predators. Through an analysis of this study and related international cases, this article argues that the uncritical dismissal of rumours and the categories used to interpret such conflicts have detrimental impacts on the conservation of wild predators. Such rumours should be understood as significant comment devices within human–animal relations and the power dynamics that frame human groups affected by them.

KEYWORDS

Human–wildlife conflict, rumours, conspiracies, predators, wildlife conservation

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1. INTRODUCTION

Human–wildlife conflict is a major social and environmental problem worldwide. It comprises all kinds of ecosystems, negatively impacting wild nonhuman animals and the livelihoods of different peoples, and encompassing diverse realities and species around the globe (Dickman 2010). These conflicts emerge when the behaviour (i.e., feeding habits, territory occupation, movements, etc.) of wild nonhuman animals impact negatively on human communities, generating adverse reactions from people to those species, with concomitant detrimental effects in those species populations (Madden 2004). For example, the Tasmanian wolf (*Thylacinus cynocephalus*) and the Falkland wolf (*Dusicyon australis*) were driven to extinction by retaliatory killing for perceived livestock depredation (Suryawanshi et al. 2017; Woodroffe 2000). William Ripple and colleagues (2014) reported human–wildlife conflict as one of the major drivers of population decline of the world's 31 largest carnivores. Moreover, these conflicts are expected to increase owing to global socioenvironmental change and accelerating climate-based instability (Dickman 2010; Nyhus 2016; Pooley et al. 2017).

Researchers in the field of human–wildlife conflict – specifically those involving wild carnivore species – are confronted with a wide array of complex issues. These go from concrete field tensions with both human and nonhuman animals to more abstract political, cultural, religious and philosophical conundrums (Liu et al. 2011; Thorn et al. 2012). Among these, a particular kind of narrative showing similar patterns is repeated across the globe, revealing some of the categories used to describe and interpret conflictive encounters with wild nonhuman animals. We understand such narratives as 'rumours', defined as 'unverified and instrumentally relevant information statements in circulation that arise in contexts of ambiguity, danger or potential threat, and that function to help people make sense and manage risk' (DiFonzo and Bordia 2007a: 13). These rumours emphasise a series of anomalous traits in particular nonhuman animals owing to human interference, frequently characterised in a conspiratorial light. In fact, Arild Blekesaune and Katrina Rønningen (2010: 190) assert that 'the idea of conspiracy is nothing unusual in conservation conflicts' and is covered, among others, by Veronique Campion-Vincent (2005a) regarding wolves in France; Ketil Skogen, Isabelle Mauz and Olve Krange (2008) concerning wolf recovery in Norway and France; Ilektra Theodorakea and Erica von Essen (2016) on wolf presence in Greece; and by Miguel Delibes-Mateos (2017), analysing rumours about introduced rabbits in Spain. However, the number of studies in conservation specifically tackling this phenomenon in more depth is scarce, and such studies do not always incorporate theory from other fields to address this complex issue.

With the aforementioned context in mind, a one-year ethnographic study was conducted in Southern Chile, focusing on an anthropological analysis

of human–animal relations with protected predators in and around protected areas. Throughout the research, rumours of a conspiratorial tone emerged among local farmers, particularly when addressing their relations with protected predators. Closely entwined with such rumours, the role played by certain categories (i.e., ways of grouping things, beings and/or phenomena according to shared characteristics) within human relations with nonhuman animals were frequently connected to the notion of 'animals out of place', common to farming and conservation narratives alike (Knight 2000a: 14). This notion was an important element of the 'conflictive' experiences farmers had with predators, but not the only one; indeed, various nuances must be considered in order to elaborate a more complex analysis of the situations in the field.

One aspect of this is the notion of the 'wrong kind of nonhuman animals' roaming around, presenting an intrinsic problem. Contrary to the typical anomaly of an 'incorrect species' present in a given place, held by conservationists (e.g., with regard to invasive species), the problematic nonhuman animals here were, in fact, of the same species as the local ones. The disruptive aspect thus had to do mainly with their behaviour, expressed in the way these nonhuman animals hunted and showed themselves, as well as their close proximity to farmers' households and a seemingly brazen attitude towards human presence. This behaviour, deemed as 'anomalous' by the farmers, was a phenomenon that local people did not accept as a natural outcome of local conditions or spontaneous particularities of individual animals, and therefore needed to be explained. Regarded as an unsettling experience, various local farmers connected such behaviours with the *supposed* irregular origin of such animals, and with certain people behind their presence acting in non-transparent ways.

It is in this manner that such explanations were put forward, as mentioned before, as rumours with a notably conspiratorial tone, highlighting the lack of information around the translocation of protected predators at a more general level. In this sense, it must be noted that there is no programme for the reintroduction of native predators in the research area. However, specific case translocations do occur, performed by the Servicio Agrícola y Ganadero (SAG) – that is, by the Chilean Agricultural and Livestock Service, part of the Ministry of Agriculture, which is the institution in charge of the protection of wild flora and fauna. In relation to local protected predators, the SAG limits itself to the removal and translocation of those denounced as problematic to more isolated areas, far from anthropic intervention. Because of this, it sometimes coordinates with the Chilean Forestry Corporation (Corporación Nacional Forestal, CONAF), which oversees the administration of Public Protected Areas, among other duties, therefore providing places for translocation at a national level but not translocating animals themselves.

This paper's aim is to describe this phenomenon and analyse it from an anthropological perspective, using international cases but focusing on a particular area of southern Chile. More specifically, it aims to connect a problematisation

of the usage of 'wild' and 'domestic' categories among local farmers with the dynamics of conspiratorial rumours regarding the presence and traits of conflictive protected predators. The article thus begins with a brief characterisation of the study site and the methods used in the research, focusing afterwards on the description and analysis of anomalous characteristics in protected predators, as highlighted by participants. An analysis of the usage of the categories *wild* and *domestic* – as connected with conspiratorial rumours but also as tools to frame perceived anomalies in predators – is then developed. The next part of the paper is dedicated to the kinds of causes and responsibilities identified in the study site and other similar cases around the world involving human-carnivore relations. The latter is followed by a section which tackles in greater depth the structure and dynamics of conspiratorial rumours and their connections with state institutions in the study site and abroad, finishing with a section containing the main conclusions of the article.

2. STUDY SITE AND METHODS

Multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork was conducted for twelve months from September 2014 to September 2015. This fieldwork was conducted in three protected areas and the rural households surrounding them, near the towns of Villarrica and Pucón in the La Araucanía Region of southern Chile. The protected areas were Huerquehue National Park, Villarrica National Park and the Cañi Sanctuary; the former two are state-managed protected areas, while the latter is private. Indeed, founded in 1992 by North American environmentalists, the Cañi Sanctuary was one of the first stretches of private land to become a protected area in Chile. It has a long history in the territory and, since 1994, the 500 hectares of parkland have been managed by the local community (see Fonck and Jacob 2018).

Significantly, the study area is encompassed by Mapuche ancestral territory called *Wallmapu*. The Mapuche constitute the largest indigenous people living in Chile and Argentina. In Chile, they have historically lived from the Choapa River to the Chiloé Archipelago and, in Argentina, they have lived from Buenos Aires to the Río Negro Province (see Bengoa 2000). Nowadays, the study area is inhabited by Mapuche people, traditional farmers (i.e. farmers with a long history or at least 30 years living in the territory) and lifestyle migrants (i.e. people who have relocated from urban areas seeking territories with particular cultural and natural characteristics). In the study site, traditional farmers own their land as a process of inheritance from former settlers or '*colonos*' (see Bengoa 2014). Today, traditional farmers' farms are, in most cases, no larger than five hectares. The main wildlife species that are considered 'problematic' are the puma (*Puma concolor*), the Culpeo fox (*Lycalopex culpaeus*) and the Chilla fox (*Lycalopex griseus*), with the former being categorised as 'near

threatened' and the latter two as 'of least concern' by the Chilean Ministry of the Environment.

An ethnographic approach was followed throughout this research, comprising participant observations of various duration with indigenous and non-indigenous small-scale farmers; park rangers from the Huerquehue and Villarrica National Parks and the Cañi Sanctuary; and staff from state institutions that pertain to wildlife conservation (Bernard 2006; Fontein 2014; O'Reilly 2005). Twenty-three semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants, having obtained their prior, freely given and appropriately informed consent. Even though some agricultural tasks were undertaken with local farmers, giving them the opportunity to speak about their relations with protected predators during participant observation (see Benavides 2020), most of the data presented below comes from interviews. All the names included in this paper are pseudonyms to ensure the participants' anonymity; this research was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Aberdeen and by the Ethics Committee of the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile.

3. THE ANOMALOUS BEHAVIOUR OF PREDATORS

As a starting point, it is necessary to understand how participants described and explained 'anomalous behaviour' in relation to protected predators. These descriptions seemed to follow the idea of anomaly as 'an element which does not fit a given set or series' (Douglas 2002: 38). At the same time, we must keep in mind that there is a strong 'psychological motivation' among people to understand peculiar phenomena, and that 'not understanding is thus aversive and uncomfortable' (DiFonzo and Bordia 2007b: 20). Thus, descriptions of the perceived anomalies were entwined with fragments of causal explanations (to be covered in further sections), offered up by participants in order to make these outlying elements more understandable and manageable. An example of this was clearly expressed by Jaime – a farmer who lived on the fringes of the Huerquehue National Park with his wife, María – when he described a puma (also known as '*lion*' by Chilean rural dwellers) attack their sheep during a winter season:

> I immediately thought …, I mean, this was not a wild-wild lion, it was a lion that had been brought in by someone, because of the way in which he hunted. Because he killed one of my sheep. I told María 'No, this lion has no experience, nothing. This one was brought by someone here', so he killed my sheep and the next day I just left her there … and he came the next day and ate her legs, and a lion of those … like natural-natural, wild one, doesn't do that. A lion kills, bleeds out his prey, he tries to drag it and first he eats the chest and what he last eats are the legs. Therefore, I told María, 'this is not a wild lion'. After that I finished the sheep breeding because I knew … that he had been released.

Another aspect stressed by Jaime and María was the pattern followed during hunting: Jaime noted that a wild puma 'knows how to hunt, you always find remains when he has already hunted, and he hunts only one *bicho* and that's it, finished',[1] pointing to a sort of 'rational' consumption instead of the much hated 'surplus killing' (Kruuk 2002: 51–53; Lindquist 2000: 179);[2] María added that pumas were very difficult to spot, foregrounding an expectable 'natural' characteristic of wild felines that is also highlighted by rural dwellers in other contexts (for example, in Wales; see Hurn 2009). Jaime agreed with his wife and asserted:

> That's why I say that when the lion has been kept in captivity it's a lion that you can see around …, you can see him. It's one that allows himself to be seen …, contrary to the one that has not been in captivity …, it has other timing.

A similar situation emerged with other participants for whom foxes were the focus of attention. When I visited Pablo (a farmer who lived in the sector of Coilaco Alto, close to the Cañi Sanctuary), the topic about predators presenting anomalous behaviours came forth as soon as we spoke about agricultural activities. Pablo asserted that 'you can know a wild natural fox, you can differentiate it from one which has been in captivity, they do not behave the same'; in general, this referred to foxes who'd escaped captivity coming too close to human-inhabited places. In another conversation, Jaime and María touched on a similar point, saying that 'it is noticeable that they are introduced foxes, because they arrive here, and you can speak to them'.

Here, the notions of 'natural' and 'wild' tended to overlap, although on other occasions they were clearly differentiated. Consequently, these predators were categorised as outsiders by the participants – nonhuman animals with which no previous relations had been established, nor incorporated in any way (i.e., they were 'not our foxes'). This is similar to what Radhika Govindrajan (2018: 99) describes in Uttarakhand, India, regarding what local inhabitants identified as *baharwale* ('outsider') monkeys. These 'outsiders' were supposedly brought from urban centres in secretive operations, and were experienced as more destructive, brazen and dangerous than the regular local monkeys, categorised as *pahari* ('of the mountain') – a term used to characterise both human and nonhuman animals that are closely linked with the place they inhabit as well to local deities (Govindrajan 2018: 9–11, 99–100).

1. The Spanish word *bicho* can be equated with the term 'critter', in English. According to Real Academia de la Lengua Española (2014), the term derives from the vulgar Latin, *bestius*, meaning 'animal'. It is a commonly used word in Chile, referring mainly to insects, but it is also applied to 'creatures' in a more generic way.
2. In Mongolia, this pattern of 'surplus killing' is seen in wolves as 'selfish' and 'purposeless' thievery, rendering them 'anti-human' and eventually into polluting nonhuman animals when contacted alive (High 2017: 112–113). See also Trajçe (2016: 125–126, 147–149) for analysis of the perceived contrast between the seemingly rational consumption patterns of bears and the wasteful consumption of wolves, specifically regarding livestock in Albania's highlands.

Another participant, named Nibaldo, who lived with his wife at their farm close to the Villarrica National Park, described how they had lost six hens and some free-ranging chickens in a few days, asserting that these were 'the foxes that SAG released …, no, CONAF', which were, from their perspective, quite different to those they encountered regularly. They called these foxes 'domestic' foxes (*zorros domésticos*) because they did not flee when they saw people around, unlike the 'wild' ones (*zorros silvestres*) that disappeared immediately. In this case, the chain of connection seems quite explicit: these foxes showed anomalous confidence when encountering humans and were thus recategorised as 'domestic' and immediately related to the role played by state institutions regarding wildlife conservation and the administration of Public Protected Areas.

4. THE WILD AND THE DOMESTIC

Nibaldo's usage of the category 'domestic' when referring to certain foxes reinforced the perception that these nonhuman animals were neither 'natural' nor 'wild'. 'Domestic' was therefore being applied in a less essentialist way than usual, even though Nibaldo did not elaborate more on the issue. In Spanish, as in other languages, *doméstico* is related to the household and commonly used for nonhuman animals under human control – especially nonhuman farm animals – as a counterpoint to wild fauna (Ingold 2000). Because of this, the common understanding and usage of the concept 'domestic' involves nonhuman animals that are born as such, under human control. In contrast, Nerissa Russell (2007: 32) asserts that, outside the field of anthropology, 'domestication almost always harkens back to an earlier meaning: to habituate to home life'. Consequently, according to these human-centred understandings of the concept, domestication as 'bringing animals into the household' (Russell 2007: 33), and therefore closer to humans and their activities, would imply some form of control over them (see also Shanklin 1985).

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this dual way of categorising wild protected predators in relation to their anomalous behaviours is that it repeats itself in a different regional and sociocultural context. According to Dhee and colleagues (2019: 382), local villagers and shepherds who participated in their study in the Hamirpur district of Himachal Pradesh, India, 'almost unanimously' referred to leopards with which there had been conflictive encounters 'as "*paltu*", meaning "domesticated" as opposed to the "jungle" or "wild" leopards that have always existed in the landscape'. This categorisation was, at the same time, tied to 'popular conspiracy theories' in the study area, which explained the presence of such predators in areas dominated by human dwellers (ibid.).

Regarding the cases under discussion here, it is necessary to think about the relation established between the notions of 'natural' and 'wild' when referring to nonhuman animals. Akin to protected areas around the world, wild nonhuman animals are seen as 'natural' and/or part of nature (Curtin 2005). Anomalous behaviours, or breached expectations of 'wildness', are equated to an altered state provoked by humans as the opposite to nature. For instance, in their study of wolf presence in Greece, Theodorakea and von Essen (2016) explain how ideas of 'unnaturalness' included comments on the wolf becoming 'increasingly tame in his present habitat, no longer fearing human presence, and displaying behaviour that was uncharacteristic of the old – and allegedly "natural" and wild – wolf' (34); this was seemingly because of the protection granted to them by humans (see also Stokland 2020). Several narratives of wolves being 'secretly released' into the area – together with others describing their hybrid nature – buttressed the idea of a compromised core wildness (Theodorakea and von Essen 2016: 34). Consequently, participants did not see the value in preserving or protecting 'unnatural' wolves. The concept of 'unnatural' thus worked as a 'value-deleting property', utilised more or less strategically by affected individuals in order to strengthen their position with regard to the impacts of wildlife. Interestingly, this may be related to a mutated kind of NIMBY[3] argument, precluding the possibility of coexistence with the actual predators roaming around through the acceptance of only 'pure' and theoretical versions of local predators (von Essen and Allen 2020: 100–102, 105–106).

What we highlight here (as a very similar pattern) is Theodorakea and von Essen's (2016: 35) idea that 'unnaturalness was imminently connected with human interferences', which could include 'captive breeding' and 'secret releases', with the consequent tame and/or unpredictable characteristics considered unnatural in wild predators (ibid.; see also Delibes-Mateos 2017: 243 on unnatural traits of allegedly introduced rabbits in Spain). In the Chilean case, for some local participants, like Jaime, close contact between people and 'wild' predators would eliminate nonhuman animals' natural instincts and survival abilities, in particular those related to feeding (see also Doubleday 2017: 37; von Essen 2017: 480); the resulting closeness would thus be similar to that held with domestic nonhuman animals, but would be improper in this case (see Chao 2019: 830–831).

For some participants, domestic closeness was oddly coupled with nonhuman animals' 'wild instincts', generating a worst-case scenario in the case of foxes, with a lack of fear towards humans being combined with the regular drive to kill and eat poultry. Consequently, this inappropriate close contact was

3. NIMBY refers to the colloquial expression, 'Not In My Backyard'; although there is a considerable body of research related to this phenomenon (see, for example, Burningham 2000; Crozier and Hajzler 2010; Esaiasson 2014; von Essen and Allen 2020), a thorough review of NIMBYism exceeds the scope of the present article.

seen as the main reason why the attacks on livestock had anomalous characteristics, and also why some of these nonhuman animals were so brazen and defiant. This resonates with ideas about 'proper' human and nonhuman animal 'proxemics', producing a 'distanced sociality' (Benavides 2017: 165; 2020: 606). Such ideas refer not only to spatial ordering, but to a range of behaviours that would embody and sustain such sociality (see also Trajçe 2016, in relation to wolves and bears in Albania's highlands and their spatial relations with locals). It is proper wildness that would keep the sociality with protected predators appropriately distanced.

The 'domesticated' traits of closeness and intermingling with protected predators were thus considered a perversion of proper human-nonhuman animal relationships by several participants in our study.[4] We therefore stress participants' understanding of a less intimate but nevertheless present relationality with wild protected predators. However, fieldwork examples here presented this more fragile form of sociality as being breached by anomalous protected predators. It is necessary, then, to address the elements that participants identified as root causes of such disruption, which repeat the conspiratorial discursive elements present in the aforementioned studies by Theodorakea and von Essen (2016), Govindrajan (2018) and Dhee et al. (2019).

5. CAUSES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

When reviewing aspects of 'wildness' and the 'domestic', and their connections with people-predator's conflicts, the allocation of responsibility for inadequate contact was crucial. It is in this sense that rumours pointing to the role played by state institutions took centre stage, characterised by conspiratorial aspects. For instance, following explanations that predators had been subject to improper closeness with humans, Jaime and María were asked who they thought released the anomalous pumas in the area and why. Quite certain about it, both answered that 'most probably is SAG', adding that CONAF could also be to blame; they also criticised the lack of previous contact with locals to inform them about such re-introductions. Jaime commented that 'we would collaborate much more if it was that way … , we would enclose our *bichos*, having everything properly closed; that would be better'.

In a similar way, Rodolfo and his wife, Librada – who also lived close to the Cañi Sanctuary – brought up the issue of protected predators' release in the area. When asked who was responsible for such releases, they jointly explained:

R: SAG comes

L: Nooo, foxes I said…!

4. For a similar case with the Gwich'in people in Sub-Arctic Canada, see Wishart (2004).

> R: Ah foxes, foxes … and those lions they also said that had been released, those that killed Don Marcelo's animals over there. That is what they said that they had come here to release them, those lions. They came to hunt them with traps and everything. Right, that's why they wanted to hunt them with traps, to move them away.

When asked how they knew that people from SAG or CONAF were releasing these nonhuman animals there, they replied:

> R: Because they … I've never seen them, but they say they have been seen! Up here, they said there were some foxes that they came to release
>
> L: They saw them, yes, releasing them, they saw them releasing them … I don't remember well who told me! My memory is so bad nowadays … They go with special things, with special vehicles, with something like boxes and that's why we suppose that they were around. And afterwards you could find those big foxes I told you about, with yellow legs …, and those are the ones still around.

Rodolfo also insisted that the agency responsible for the release of such nonhuman animals went against local people and their knowledge. He stressed that:

> I am completely fine with the *bichos* that belong here, that are ours! But coming here to release more animals, and harmful animals?! No way, I don't agree with that … But the rest, animals that belong here and live here, we have to maintain those, why would we harm them?

Apart from anomalous behaviours, and the unfamiliar nature of the new foxes arriving in the area, it is also important to consider the perceptions of unusually high numbers of non-human predators, externally generated by their introduction by state officials. Thus, close encounters with these predators, species that are protected and considered charismatic by conservationists and state institutions, become entangled with ideas of threat and danger. For conservationists and others, there is threat in the diminishing numbers and even disappearance of certain non-human animals; for farmers, there is the 'threatening of abundance' (Lorimer 2015: 154). This relates to the fact that rumours arise in contexts perceived as 'threatening or potentially threatening' – including regarding assets, psychological well-being, personal health, etc. – in which people feel and/or express the need for security (DiFonzo and Bordia 2007b: 20).

All these variables connect to the antagonism towards state institutions – in this case, SAG and/or CONAF. Thus, the lack of wildness and 'naturalness' of certain predators was associated with the notion of being 'domesticated' as a result of state institutions' intervention and conservation activities. The similarity of these narratives – of predators being described as either 'unnatural' or 'domesticated' – might show that they were widely shared across the region. However, their similarity with cases involving conflicts with wildlife around the world must also be considered.

6. STATE INSTITUTIONS AND CONSPIRATORIAL RUMOURS

The way in which rumours regarding the presence and/or anomalous behaviours of certain nonhuman animals follow common conspiratorial patterns around the world is particularly intriguing. We understand these rumours as conspiratorial, following Matthew Dentith's (2014: 23) 'most minimal conception of what counts as a conspiracy', satisfying three conditions: (1) that there exists some set of agents with a plan (conspirators condition); (2) that these agents have taken steps to 'minimize public awareness of what they are up to' (secrecy condition); (3) that an end 'is or was desired by the agents' (goal condition).

For instance, regarding conflicts with leopards in Western India, Sunetro Ghosal and Darley Jose Kjosavik (2015: 12) explain that one of the narratives held by local people was that the forest department 'purposefully' released leopards, which were then considered 'no longer fully natural'. Leopards were acknowledged as non-human social actors but, from the local inhabitants' perspective, the distribution of responsibilities fell squarely on the government. Noticeable aspects of this and other similar cases include the 'conspiratorial' characteristics of the narratives given by local farmers in relation to the anomalous presence and/or behaviour of protected predators. The apparent secrecy and lack of concrete evidence, alongside apparently well-organised and (state) funded operations to coordinate predators' release are common elements in most cases.

In the other cases in India mentioned above, secrecy was tied to particular plans devised by those held responsible. For example, in the Hamirpur district of Himachal Pradesh, 'popular conspiracy theories' pointed toward the Forest Department as the institution responsible for the release of leopards bred in zoos, perhaps 'as a security measure' to prevent timber extraction from the local forests (Dhee et al. 2019: 382). As Govindrajan (2018: 95) explains, among the local *pahari* population in Uttarakhand, villagers speculated that outsider monkeys were 'captured in the plains and released into the mountains by real-estate developers and urban land speculators with the intention of forcing mountain villagers off their land by making it impossible for them to continue cultivation'. Outsider monkeys were thus seen as playing a distinctive role as 'agents of *pahari* cultural erosion' (ibid.).

In the present study, local farmers did not elaborate on 'hidden plans' but rather concentrated on the institutions' objectives (or their 'goal') in protecting such predators, regardless of the consequences on local small-scale farmers. Thus, one participant close to the Cañi Sanctuary reported various incidents with foxes, Harris's hawks (*Parabuteo unicinctus*) and pumas. Discussing the protection measures benefitting carnivores, he expressed:

> I mean, they should be around but no, not so many, because we heard that they came to release them here; they breed pumas and they come to release them.

> Can you see that it is an evil thing to do? People from SAG, that is what was heard, close to the Turbio River, because there is a lot of forest there and, once there, the *bichos* have to find how to sustain themselves. You had them here, you don't have to increase their number… It's not as if we didn't have lions, there were here. And after that, the damage followed …; at that time no one was free of it …, everyone was harmed. He entered the corrals; it was a serious problem.

In the local cases, SAG agents were aware of these stories. Indeed, the SAG officer in charge of capture and relocations in the area during the study stated that: 'we provide a service to small-scale farmers, relocating predators that attack their livestock. That is what we specifically do'.[5] When we touched on the issue of conspiracy stories, his mood and comments became angrier, asserting that people sometimes said that 'we were releasing pumas … [from] trucks, full of cages! Can you imagine?' After that, he authoritatively explained that, when those kinds of things are said:

> I get in touch with local inhabitants and tell them 'Look, if we are going to have these stories going around, then it's all fine, we leave and just move to another area where people denounce predator attacks, where people are willing to work with us'. It's that simple!

Similarities appear again when analysing the human–snow leopards conflict in Himalayan India (Mathur 2015). Faced with an increase in attacks in the area, government officials provided an explanation based on climate change and the disruption of ecosystems forcing leopards out of their regular habitats. Local inhabitants, on the other hand, attributed the increase to human behaviour more directly – in this case, pointing to people from the plains area releasing old leopards from zoos up to the mountains because of overcrowding, or to die from old age. This explanation was rejected by government officials, considered as 'nothing other than a particularly silly conspiracy theory' (Mathur 2015: 95), and consequently, entirely disregarded. Moreover, Nayanika Mathur states that she encountered 'plenty of eye witnesses who swore to have seen leopards from the plains being driven up in huge vans and then released into the jungles', but without any official confirmation or further evidence of this practice (Mathur 2015: 95; for similar cases, see Govindrajan 2018: 90–96; Trajçe 2016: 143). In a very similar vein, Theodorakea and von Essen (2016: 35) assert that rumours of wolves 'released from captivity' in their study area in Greece were 'substantiated by almost every respondent's willingness to tell a

5. SAG officers were aware of the limited effectiveness of relocating pumas, which could in the end endanger them; this is because of predators' efforts to go back to their original territories, or because of conflicts with other pumas in the places where they were translocated. For a more thorough analysis of the efficacy of puma relocation, see Francisco Fontúrbel and Javier Simonetti (2011); also compare this with the leopard relocation cases in India and the series of negative effects that followed, including increases in attacks to humans (Athreya 2006; Athreya et al. 2011; Athreya et al. 2013).

story about people driving cars with wolf cages in the mountains'. Comparable narratives were recorded by Aleksander Trajçe (2016: 143) regarding wolves 'being artificially increased in numbers by outside entities such as government agencies or animal protection groups', including intentional releases in Albanian highland areas.[6]

These seemingly 'silly conspiracy theories' and tall tales say a lot regarding tensions in people–wildlife conflicts; they can be understood as counter narratives that express discontent and angry helplessness in relation to powerful institutions and social groups (Mathur 2015). Although the term 'conspiracy theory' was never used by participants in the present research, the dismissal of these kinds of stories as persistent rumours or as myths was present, in a very similar style, with nuances brought up by SAG. When interviewed about these stories and local interpretations, the Director of the local SAG office said:

> And on the issue of pumas, we have always been blamed for that, because on some occasions they have seen us with the cage, releasing into National Parks and the people …, they exaggerate what they see! We have come close to Curarrehue and people have told us 'I have seen SAG trucks releasing pumas', trucks loaded with pumas! In other words, we, opening the truck and there they go, 20 pumas, released … Then, that's a myth, a myth.

It is possible to empathise with SAG officers on the matter, accepting that several facts in these narrations sound exaggerated. One probable basis for this is the media, including the tirade of images (i.e., pictures of wild predators in special cages transported by SAG personnel) and TV news related to the capture and relocation of wild predators by SAG in different areas of the country. Dhee and colleagues (2019: 383) explain that, in Himachal Pradesh, 'partial knowledge' regarding instances where leopards have been captured in human dominated areas and released elsewhere may have 'spread across the landscape' and mutated into the existing conspiracy theory of zoo-raised leopards' mass release. However, this does not mean that these are nonsense stories that respond only to local ignorance, or that can be simply corrected through information and education. These stories exist for more than one reason and speak of an unfolding context, which must be attended to if we are to understand the phenomenon (Byford 2011; Dentith 2014; Douglas, Sutton and Chicocka 2019). We must, once again, interpret such rumours as strategies employed by local populations to cope with various 'anxieties and uncertainties'

6. Trajce also highlighted that both blame and presumed causes for the attacks were more widely attributed by local participants in his research areas, who also pointed towards the nature of wolves; livestock owners and/or shepherds' careless management; and metaphysical powers directing predatory attacks as moral reckonings (Trajçe 2016: 152–166; see also Benavides 2020: 604, 606; Skogen et al. 2019: 138). Thus, variations should be considered in relation to this phenomenon, where the state is not always automatically blamed for the impacts of wildlife on local people.

about non-human predators by providing explanations and a rationale for their behaviour (Rosnow and Foster 2005: 1).

Scarce contact with the state institutions in charge of wildlife conservation (added to the hierarchies present in their exchanges) gave the impression of a dismissive bureaucratic apparatus that provided no clear solutions. Indeed, these rumours revealed an explicit opposition to the state institutions in charge of wildlife conservation and protected areas. Moreover, even without academic research on this issue, anecdotal evidence shows that rural populations in the area tend to have limited trust in the state as a whole, particularly with regard to the irregular or inadequate support given to help address local problems (i.e. water provision, agricultural credits, public infrastructure, etc.) and to the general historic poverty still affecting these populations (Oyarzún and Miranda 2011). As the La Araucanía Region is still the poorest region in Chile (CASEN 2017), the state has become an 'increasingly important factor in the social determination of people–wildlife conflict', transforming the nature of these conflicts or adding a layer of 'people-state' friction (Knight 2000a: 22). The conspicuous presence of official protection measures regarding wildlife thus understandably mobilises people to attribute blame to state authorities and demand political redress when they have been negatively affected by protected nonhuman animals. It is in this sense that rumours describing the covert release of introduced wildlife take the form of accusatory tales, usually directed towards other more powerful stakeholders related to such conflictive situations (Campion-Vincent 2005b; Delibes-Mateos 2017; Skogen, Mauz and Krange 2008).

Such recurrent stories involving nonhuman animal-release should be understood as meaningful narratives, even though the tendency is to present them as 'always false and maliciously created' (Campion-Vincent 2005a: 108). As 'truth claims' involving 'unsecured, unverified information' (ibid.), rumours are shared because of their plausibility and *can* even be accurate, as with cases of lynx reintroduction in Switzerland (Theodorakea and von Essen 2016: 30), or the secret reintroduction of beavers in the Pyrenees (Vaccaro and Beltran 2009: 506–507; see also Blekesaune and Rønningen 2010; Douglas, Sutton and Chicocka 2019; Govindrajan 2018). Moreover, even when this is not the case, rumours still 'reveal fundamental truths about the nature of the cultural order' (Campion-Vincent 2005a: 108). Part of the complexity here is that the rumours in question involve nonhuman animals frequently considered as simultaneously positive and harmful by those affected (Campion-Vincent 2005a: 109; see also Benavides 2020). This is particularly the case when the people affected are small-scale farmers, with limited resources, who already feel marginalised by more powerful semi-anonymous institutions, including those of the state.

The dismissal of such counter narratives as mere nonsense, or the act of labelling and terming narratives as 'conspiracy theories', becomes a 'key tactic

of power' by which these stories are associated with paranoia and absurdity and pitted against supposedly rational or 'scientific' official narratives (Mathur 2015: 104). The critical point of the discussion here is not the facts portrayed by such rumours, that is, their 'truth-value', but their dynamics as 'subaltern speech' (Mathur 2015: 104). As Didier Fassin (2011: 41) argues, conspiracy theories should be considered as avenues by which to 'express social imaginaries and political anxieties that remain unspeakable or unheard'. These local narratives develop in tension with 'practices of state categorization', which would effectively seek (and/or allow by default) an obliteration of narratives spawned by anxiety and anger, such as those related to material deprivations or powerless positions (on the latter, see also Douglas, Sutton and Chicocka 2019: 67–68).

In this sense, further research should be undertaken regarding 'the social context in which conflicts over wildlife play out' (Skogen et al. 2019: 146), in order to gain deeper understanding of critical areas that might influence local perceptions of disempowerment and lack of agency. For instance, following the findings of Theodorakea and von Essen (2016: 37) regarding Greek shepherds and their relationship with wolf conservation, local farmers might perceive blockages in 'existing avenues for communication' of protection policies focused on predators. Even if public participation channels pertaining to wild predators' conservation are open, these might be difficult to engage with, implying the need to be 'politically organized and rhetorically powerful; familiar with the proper institutional channels and the right people, in addition to securing funds to safeguard one's participation' (ibid.). Consequently, the perception of being marginalised from 'legal channels of redress and public channels of debate' would be a fertile terrain for the emergence of rumours.

7. CONCLUSION

The focus on predators' anomalous behaviour and the emergence of conspiratorial narratives as accusatory tales can be construed as collective symbolic productions: meaningful cultural discourses, expressing local concerns about authorities' prioritising nonhuman animals and/or nature over humans (Campion-Vincent 2005a: 109). As such, local rumours or 'conspiracy' theories would not be just narratives employed to manage anomalous phenomena, although they do play a role in this regard (Douglas, Sutton and Chicocka 2019). As knowledge forms, the rumours at the base of such narratives represent 'meaningful strategies of coping with uncertainty and risk from outside agendas' (Theodorakea and von Essen 2016: 36), revealing inherent problems within conservation policies and governmental approaches. A core aspect of rumours dynamics has to do with the power exerted by official discourses, buttressed by 'technical-ecological expertise' regarding conflictive issues with

wildlife. This 'homogenization of discourse' displaces other voices (if they emerge at all) and such marginalisation usually backfires on the dominant views, challenging 'the legitimacy of policy' (von Essen 2017: 483). Thus, rumours concerning the intentional release of protected predators would not only provide a defined frame to interpret anomalous and harming events, but also put forward stories that undermine the legitimacy of authorities when perceived as unjust (Theodorakea and von Essen 2016: 36; see also Hill 2017: 7).

Nevertheless, the problematic aspects of conspiratorial rumours must also be highlighted, as problematic forms of communication. On the one hand, they provide a sense of shared meaning and a more or less common position for rural communities, occasionally opening avenues into the public space, with a potential to trigger debates (Theodorakea and von Essen 2016). On the other hand, rumours can serve to 'merely displace hostility (Foster 2004), and they generally lack transparency owing to the opaque climate in which they are produced (Scott 1992; Theodorakea and von Essen 2016: 37). Yet, if there are no sanctioned spaces for different views and perspectives to counter hegemonic (state-sanctioned) discourses, such views will find alternate channels, avoiding 'rigid parameters for argumentation' that usually predefine certain groups as incompetent or in need of education (von Essen 2017: 483). In this move from the public sphere towards private and sometimes anti-systemic spaces, 'attitudes undergo radicalization as feelings of injustice are magnified' (ibid.: 484).

In order to criticise state institutions and uphold local rural interests, it is necessary to problematise further the notions of 'wild' and 'domestic' in relation to nonhuman animals – particularly given the former homogenises the varied characteristics of multiple creatures, preventing the exploration of differing interspecies interactions (Harris and Hamilakis 2014). Indeed, to avoid essentialised understandings of such categories, we must consider that definitions of what may be classed as wild, domestic, natural or cultural depend heavily on the specific contexts and arguments or methodologies used, , rather than on any intrinsic qualities (Ellen 1996).

On the other hand, given the non-essentialised ways in which both 'wild' (as a process of 'becoming' [see Süssekind 2016: 140–141]) and 'domestic' were used in the field, it is worth reconsidering how the concept 'domestic' functions as 'an ongoing and unruly relationship' (Cassidy 2007: 20). Rather than being constituted by fixed elements, the 'domesticated' should be considered a 'spectrum of different *kinds* of relationships' (Russell 2007: 30). This is particularly the case if we want to understand farmers' experiences with 'wild' life, where the fuzzy borders of the concept relate to anxieties triggered by contact with protected predators.

The usage and interplay of these 'categories' points to the human need for 'engagement' or 'distance' from other nonhuman animals, instead of engaging with what nonhuman animals 'are', 'do' or their potential ways of being (Marvin 2002: 155). This happens mainly because of human difficulties in

grasping the understandings and definitions that other nonhuman animals might have of themselves. A deep philosophical conundrum this also gestures towards issues regarding the proper place of humanity when confronted with other creatures – particularly when close connections are established. We believe that such tension surrounding humanity's place within and in relation to the environment was condensed in our participants' reflections on proper behaviours, appropriate distances and forms of sociality associated with nonhuman animals in the vicinity.

The previous analysis of the reshaping of the 'domestic' category is connected with important anthropological criticisms of dualistic approaches in human and nonhuman animal relations, concerning the ample variety of cultural understandings to which wild nonhuman animals are subjected (Knight 2000b: 10). This points to the fact that an unequivocal opposition between 'wild' and 'domestic' nonhuman animals is far from universal (Harris and Hamilakis 2014: 6–7). Just as in other societies, the participants' relationships with wild nonhuman animals was not lived as a 'beyond control' situation, but rather offered various examples of kinship ties and complex interconnected socialites (Descola 2014; Descola and Pálsson 1996; Ingold 1988, 2000; Nadasdy 2007, 2016; Willerslev 2004, 2007, 2013).

We believe that the conflictive aspects of these relationships with nonhuman animals – and the rumours that funnel negative emotions associated with them – are tied with more or less rigid categorisations and understandings of the spheres of action of nonhuman animals and their particular natures. In our study, the usage of the concepts 'wild' and 'domestic' in cultural practices and conspiratorial narratives were triggered by the unruly characteristics of nonhuman animals' initiatives. Such narratives should be construed as an effort to give sense to the conflictive situations experienced as a result of the politically regulated cohabitation with nonhuman animals. However, they should also be understood as a medium in which the fuzzy boundaries of 'wild' and 'domestic' are revealed, calling for a more complex and critical analysis.

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